

Improving Service to the Public

WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENCE

United States Civil Service Commission

Washington, D. C. 20415

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INTRODUCTION

President Johnson wants Federal officials to reply promptly and responsively to letters from the public. Several times in the past year he expressed his personal interest in assuring that the public get this kind of service when they write to the White House and to Federal officials.

Prompt and responsive answers to public inquiries are an essential part of the drive to improve our service to the public.

A large share of mail addressed to the White House is necessarily referred to departments and agencies for reply and some delay in answering this correspondence has been noted. Since this mail ordinarily receives priority attention, letters from the public addressed to the department or agency may be delayed even more.

Chairman John W. Macy, Jr., of the Civil Service Commission asked Federal officials who have been designated to lead programs to improve service in their organizations to meet with him to discuss this problem. The purpose of the meeting was to explore ways of reaching the goal of a high quality, personal and prompt response to the citizen who writes to Government officials. Mr. Paul M. Popple, Assistant to the President, and Mr. William J. Hopkins, White House Executive Clerk, attended the meeting with the Chairman.

This is a report of that meeting.

Minutes of Meeting on
WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENCE
U. S. Civil Service Commission
February 1, 1966

The meeting was chaired by Chairman John W. Macy, Jr., of the Civil Service Commission. Chairman Macy spoke of the importance of establishing improved communication between the Government and the American people and of the role of correspondence addressed to the President in this effort. He said the President is very much concerned about the replies to letters which are addressed to him and he frequently requests reports on both the quality and the speed of the responses. Chairman Macy pointed out that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss how Federal agencies could help the White House in its goal of improving communication between the Government and the private citizen.

Chairman Macy introduced Mr. William J. Hopkins, White House Executive Clerk. Mr. Hopkins mentioned the volume of mail addressed to the White House had increased more than ten times in the last generation. There was a large increase in mail during President Kennedy's Administration, and the volume has remained at a high level since that time. Much of this mail is referred to the departments and agencies for reply.

Mr. Hopkins emphasized that in handling this referral correspondence the Federal agency was acting as a representative of the White House and should always keep in mind the dignity of the President's Office. For this reason, the reply from the agency should be from a top level official. He asked agencies submitting drafts to the White House to send those that would be appropriate to send to the correspondent and not ones submitted in anticipation that there would be changes.

Mr. Hopkins suggested that agencies consult the White House staff on any difficulty that arose in preparing replies to White House referrals. He emphasized that the President wants mail answered promptly and responsively and that it was the job of the agencies to see that this was done.

Chairman Macy introduced Mr. Paul M. Popple, Assistant to the President, who is responsible for supervising the handling of White House public correspondence. Mr. Popple said that letters from the public provided an opportunity for reciprocal action between the Government and citizens. The Government was able from such letters to appreciate the public position on important matters and Federal agencies had an obligation to give well-thought-out responses expressing the Administration's position on the subjects raised. Mr. Popple said that the reply to mail referred from the White House should always be considered to be on behalf of the President even when prepared for an agency official's signature. The reply, therefore, should be one appropriate to the Executive Branch as a whole and not one simply from the standpoint of the responding agency. Replies should not be made indicating, for example, that the solution to an individual's problem was with another agency and that the responding agency could not do anything about it. An attempt should be made either to get the necessary information or to make a referral to another agency where appropriate.

Mr. Popple recognized the difficulty in giving each piece of correspondence personal attention. He suggested, however, that each agency make a review of its mail-handling system with regard to the procedures followed and the controls used, with special attention to the question as to whether the agency had sufficient personnel assigned to do the job. He said the goal was a high quality, personal response to the American citizen 48 hours after the agency received the letter. He emphasized the President's continuing interest in meeting this standard.

Mr. Popple said that, at the present time, White House referral mail is not handled in most cases within the 48-hour standard. He pointed out instances in which replies had been delayed for weeks and even months.

Mr. Popple said that last year the White House received 1.4 million pieces of mail, about one-half of which was referred to departments and agencies for reply. Although much greater than ten years ago, the volume of referrals today is about the same as in the past two years so that, in general, the load on agencies has not increased in the recent past. Admittedly, however, the volume referred to some agencies, e.g., the State Department, has risen markedly over the past year.

Mr. Popple concluded by stating that through White House referral mail the President was talking to the people and the replies were important and should be responsive. He mentioned, too, that an increased volume of referrals to an agency may sometime indicate a need for a more general public clarification of a particular policy or program. Failure to present a policy clearly in a press release or a press briefing, for example, could result in a great deal of mail asking for clarification or indicating misunderstanding of the agency's intent.

Mr. Popple repeated his request that agencies make a review of their system for handling referral mail to make sure that everything possible is being done to give timely and responsive replies to White House referrals.

Chairman Macy said that a review by each agency of its system for preparing replies to White House correspondence seemed in order and that he would like to have a special report from the agencies on the findings of their review and any actions taken to cut down on delays and improve the responsiveness of the reply. He asked that this information be included in the report on improved service to the public which each agency has been asked to submit by April 1, 1966.

Suggestions of Agency Representatives

The following comments and suggestions were made by the department and agency representatives at the meeting:

- A tight control on mail by the department or agency head can do much to improve the response time. In some departments and agencies, Congressional mail is tightly controlled and must be answered within a short period after receipt; if not, a report goes to the agency head. (Chairman Macy noted that White House referral mail should receive similar attention.)
- White House referral mail is of different types. While some general inquiries can be handled quickly, individual case problems sent to the President's attention often require time to get the facts and to prepare the reply. In this situation, an acknowledgment should be sent to the correspondent.
- Answering some mail at the top echelon of a department or agency was suggested as a means of improving the response time. While some mail clearly needs technical attention, general inquiries might be answered at the top level without being referred down in the organization for reply.
- Predicting when a large volume of mail will be received can help the department or agency mobilize its resources to reply. For example, when the President's message to Congress regarding a particular program is given, then the action agency can expect a heavy volume of White House referral mail. Agencies should prepare in advance to handle this predictable volume of correspondence.
- An analysis from the White House to the agency on the time lag in preparing replies was suggested as a way to keep the agency alert to problem areas. (A close control by the agency itself of White House referral mail is another way to identify problem areas.)
- Some effort should be put into personalizing our replies. If a reply has been delayed, a reason should be given the correspondent. Stock phrases not responsive to the questions raised should not be used.